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ABSTRACT

Though recent research indicates a stronger sense of purpose and satisfaction among faculty at community colleges relative to four-year institutions, criticism of community colleges for alleged deficiency in facilitating transfer to the four-year schools is widespread. This function however, is only one of the many comprehensive services provided by the community college. Such a comprehensive approach caters to first generation students, those who have previously done poorly as students or workers, those interested in career change and, generally, those who look to the community college as the only adult learning institution prepared to meet their needs as life circumstances change. To focus exclusively, or even primarily on the transfer function as some critics demand, jeopardizes the efficacy of the community college in its other roles. The diverse ends serviced by the more comprehensive philosophy ought not be subordinated to the attainment of the baccalaureate. Access to the community college, which includes flexibility in terms of points of entry and exit, must be maintained. Transfer cannot be maximized without doing some damage to comprehensiveness, which is not to say that transfer cannot be made more effective within the context of comprehensiveness. Community colleges are not simply the weak link in the transition from high school to college. Given its relative youth, the community college should be left to develop its own unique identity and not be limited in scope owing to its relation to the four-year colleges. Restrictions on movement within the community college system may ultimately discourage student participation and impede experimentation. The transfer function is an important role, but is one among many played by community colleges. (GFW)

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Transfer: Major Mission of Community Colleges?

by
K. Patricia Cross

July 9, 1990

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TRANSFER: MAJOR MISSION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES?*

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Last week, as I boarded the plane to Washington D.C., I had in my briefcase two new journals--the May/June issue of Change and the June/July issue of the AACJC Journal. My intention was to take along a little professional reading -- nothing so strenuous that it couldn't be done while wedged between a father with wailing infant on one side and voluble retired secretary, going to visit the grandchildren on the other. I had also put, in my briefcase, some recent reports on the transfer issue -- Lou Bender's national study on transfer, the Pincus and Archer recommendations for meeting the transfer needs of minority students, a just-issued report on the plight of non-college bound students, and various and sundry other pieces that I thought would provide background reading for the topic we address today.

Thus armed with good intentions and plenty of reading, I flipped open the latest issue of Change to find there a Carnegie Trendline Report, entitled, "Community Colleges: A Sector with a Clear Purpose." (1990, pp 23-26). I was pleased to read their conclusion that, "Although ambivalence about mission and purpose may exist within the institutions, our data reveal that it has not yet affected the faculty. Community college faculty," concluded the

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Carnegie researchers, "have the clearest sense of purpose of any sector of higher education, and feel good about their institutions" (p. 24)

Compared with four-year institutions, the morale, enthusiasm, sense of purpose and satisfaction among faculty was more positive in community colleges. I didn't find that hard to believe; actually it corresponded fairly well with my own perceptions gained as I travel about the country, talking with faculty from all types of colleges. Although faculty everywhere have their problems, community college faculty strike me as dedicated, enthusiastic, eager to learn, and on the whole challenged and energetic in meeting the problems of higher education. What was a bit more surprising was that Carnegie Trendlines attributed the high morale of community college teachers to the clarity of purpose of today's community college. They wrote, "...we believe this lack of tension over values and expectations helps explain the higher personal satisfaction displayed by community college faculty members." (p.25).

So, pleasantly lulled into a sense of false security, I stuffed Change back into my briefcase and pulled out the latest issue of the AACJC Journal, which seemed to suggest that the "clear sense of purpose" found by Carnegie wasn't quite so clear among those who know community colleges best. The editor's introduction to this issue of the Journal said, "criticisms of the transfer function have become all the rage these days..."(p. 2). An article by a group of California authors agreed but noted that transfer bashing was not just a recent event but has been going on for years in California (p. 30). Dick Alfred and Russell Peterson added their perception that, "Community

colleges have been buffeted by a storm of recent studies describing problems with transfer." (p.27). Lou Bender, fresh from a year-long study of the transfer issue, gave transfer a double "very" proclaiming it a "very very nationwide concern" (p. 24). The AACJC Board, acting on Bender's recommendation, proclaimed 1991 the "Year of the Transfer."

Clearly, transfer is a hot topic and is being singled out as more in need of attention -- or more deserving of it -- than the other functions of the comprehensive community college. Norton Grubb and I have divided our task today. We share a concern about the viability of the headlong rush to strengthen the transfer function. I am going to speak to the conceptual issues, describing some basic incompatibilities between the comprehensive mission of community colleges and the current promotion of the transfer function. Norton will speak to the cause of the decline in transfer performance and the incompatibilities between causes and proposed solutions that focus on articulation. In short, I will present some thoughts about why promotion of the transfer function probably **should not** work; Norton will follow with some thoughts about why it probably **will not** work.

It is easy to think of comprehensiveness as a large amalgamation of people and programs that is big, sturdy, and perhaps, a survivor beyond academic debates because, pragmatically at least, comprehensiveness is the path of least resistance. But in reality, the comprehensive community college is a fragile ideal, framed in the philosophy of educational service to the total community.

The comprehensive community college comes closer than anything in the history of education to responding to the multiple and continuous learning needs of local communities. It is a first-chance institution for thousands of first-generation students. It is a second-chance institution for those who have done poorly in school or on the job or who wish to change jobs or the direction of their lives. It is, for many people, an only-chance institution. They must look to the local community college as the only adult learning institution prepared to meet their needs as life circumstances change.

I believe that there are good and principled reasons for maintaining the comprehensive mission of community colleges, but to do so requires constant vigilance and careful balancing of priorities. The comprehensive mission can very easily be tilted off balance by the promotion of some priorities over others. Today's community colleges are held together by carefully balanced tensions between, for example, service to young people just starting out, mid-life career changers, and older citizens seeking satisfaction in learning itself. There are fragile relationships to be established with employers, community agencies, high schools, and four-year colleges. Balance is called for in providing adequate resources for both the gifted and the underprepared. Maintaining the prestige and egos of the faculties in vocational, community, transfer, and developmental education is a delicate balancing act, as any leader preparing for the Year 2000 knows or will necessarily learn. The very essence of the egalitarian community college is rooted in the perception that no one is a second class citizen. To make everyone -- part-time/full-time; older/younger; Anglo/minority; transfer/vocational; day student/

night student feel that the community college is for them is no simple task. In all higher education, the community college is the only institution that even tries. I have come to believe that comprehensiveness is both the distinction and the challenge of the community college

There are those who scoff at fears that the comprehensive mission of the community college is threatened by promotion of transfer over other missions. Some claim that all they want to do is to restore transfer to parity in the community college. Others contend that the viability of the community college lies in the credibility of the transfer function, and still others recommend, as do Pincus and Archer (1989) that, "The transfer function should be the central role of community colleges." (p. 3) Some claim that liberal arts education is not just one among equals in the community college curriculum, but is basic to all quality education. There is even the contention that concern about the quality of teaching and learning is more characteristic of transfer education than of other forms of community college education.

My purpose this afternoon is not to debate the merits of these varying positions, but to illustrate the fragility of the comprehensive philosophy when faced with the warring factions of transfer reform. It is popular in academe these days to talk about paradigms or models of best fit. I believe that the paradigm that best fits the transfer function does not fit very well the comprehensive mission and that therefore we cannot make transfer **maximally** effective without doing some damage to comprehensiveness. That is not to say, transfer cannot be made **more** effective within the context of

comprehensiveness, but compromises will have to be made since the goals of comprehensiveness and transfer are best accomplished through fundamentally different paradigms.

Instead of using some abstract theoretical model for this analysis, I want to use the metaphor that is most often used by advocates of transfer education. I have selected the educational pipeline as my template. For the next 10 minutes, I shall hold transfer and then comprehensiveness up to the model implied by the pipeline metaphor. The metaphor of the educational pipeline is familiar to all of us, and it lies at the heart of the transfer philosophy. The purpose of transfer reform is to increase the flow through the educational pipeline and to make transitions at the seams smooth and easy to negotiate. As desirable as that seems on the surface, there are some basic incompatibilities between the characteristics of the pipeline and the goals and characteristics of comprehensive community colleges.

1. The first and most essential characteristic of a pipeline is that it does not leak. Joints are sealed, and in a perfect pipeline, contents can neither enter nor leak at the joints. Articulation is, in a manner of speaking, an effort to tighten the seal.

Clearly if transfer is to be effective, it has to be made easier and more attractive to stay inside the pipeline than to leave it. That means tighter articulation agreements and smoother flow within the pipe. But there is a need in the comprehensive community college to keep the joints sufficiently permeable that students can move freely in and out of education, according to their needs. Moreover, students with nontraditional patterns of education must be able to enter at

transition points without penalty. The tight seals that help transfer may be detrimental to the permeability that is a characteristic of the comprehensive community college.

2. A second characteristic of the pipeline paradigm is that a pipeline confines its contents and delivers them purposefully to a single destination. That destination is, of course, the end of the pipeline, and in transfer education is the bachelor's degree. The metaphor supports transfer; but let us look at its compatibility with the comprehensive mission of community colleges.

There is, at present, no sector in all education that is so conscientiously dedicated to serving clientele with different destinations as the comprehensive community college. The most recent and comprehensive survey of students in higher education (NPSAS) found that 18% of the students enrolled in community colleges in the fall of 1986 said they wanted a bachelor's degree. One can debate endlessly whether more students should aspire to transfer or how many of those who say they want a bachelor's degree are simply giving a socially-acceptable answer. But the fact remains that the great majority of community college students today are not potential transfer students, and are not served by the transfer function. While I don't think that most people who advocate more attention to the transfer function go so far as Pincus and Archer (1989) to recommend that the transfer function become the "central role of community colleges," there is, in the writing on this topic today, the unmistakable message that a bachelor's degree is the prestige destination and that other destinations are somehow less admirable.

Once again, the pipeline metaphor fits transfer well because transfer must be the undisputed destination if transfer programs are to be maximally effective. It does not fit the comprehensive mission very well because in order to deliver the maximum number of students to four-year colleges, alternative destinations must appear less attractive. If transfer is to be improved within the egalitarian philosophy of the community college, it will have to be done without denigrating the occupations of vocational, remedial, and community education faculty and without deprecating the goals of the majority of community college students.

3. The contents of a pipeline are under pressure. Contents move at the same rate, pushed along by pressure from the central pumping station. If transfer performance is to be improved, then students need to be under moderate pressure from some central source to take the prescribed courses in the proper sequence and to keep moving toward the destination of transfer.

But the same pressure that keeps transfer students moving impedes experimentation, discourages stop outs and the non-traditional patterns of entry and re-entry that characterize the majority of community college students. Determining the right kind and amount of pressure to improve the transfer function and yet permit exploration by the majority of adult students in the community college is once again a delicate matter.

4. A pipeline moves contents in a single direction. It is unidirectional. There are no reversals, no "swirling," and contents that enter the pipeline in the lead remain in front all the way through the pipeline. The pipeline metaphor makes no sense, of

course, for the many reverse transfers to community colleges. There is simply no provision for moving in a direction contrary to the flow. There is also ample research evidence to show that, within the confines of the traditional educational pipeline, those in the lead are not overtaken by those bringing up the rear. Drop outs from the educational pipeline are identifiable as early as the fifth grade, and the probability is extremely high that a below-average student in high school will remain a below-average student in college.

Putting more of our resources into transfer will serve best those students who already lead in the educational pipeline. Indeed, concern is mounting over the inequities of the relatively high support for students who are making **educational** transitions compared with those who are making equally difficult transitions from school to work. The Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship reports that "each student enrolled in an institution of higher education can typically expect to receive a combined public and private subsidy of about $5000 per academic year --for each of four years or more --through scholarships and grants." In contrast, students who do not go on in higher education are on their own. According to a just-released report entitled, From School to Work, this country ranks among the worst in the world for helping non-college bound students enter the work force.

5. A pipeline keeps its contents pure. A pipeline that is invaded by tree roots or by mud or any other environmental factor is a defective pipeline.

We know that the most effective way to increase the transfer rate is to strengthen ties and commitment to the college while

reducing the distractions and interference of the non-college environment. Living in dorms, working on campus, participating in extra-curricular activities are all good things to do to improve transfer. While isolation from the everyday distractions of life is a characteristic of residential colleges, it is a problem for commuter community colleges. Any attempt to weaken ties to the local community is a dubious proposition for a comprehensive community college. Yet transfer is most likely to be effective if allegiances and alliances are made with the college rather than with the community.

6. Once a pipeline is laid, it is pretty difficult to change it. Since each segment is attached firmly to the preceding segment, there is no way for one segment to do something different and still remain in the pipeline. I don't see the community college as either an extension of the high school or an introduction to higher education. It is not simply the weak link in the transition from high school to college. The community college is still young, growing in both importance and identity. To fasten itself too firmly to the older and more established four-year colleges and universities reduces its flexibility to grow into its own unique identity.

In closing, I want to make it as clear as I possibly can that my purpose in analyzing the fit of the pipeline metaphor is not to discourage efforts to improve the transfer function in community colleges. Transfer should consistently strive to accomplish its distinctive goals -- as should each of the other functions of the comprehensive community college. There is evidence that the transfer performance of community colleges has declined, and the fragile comprehensive mission is at risk when any function is not

performing well. My purpose here is to plead for a more thoughtful analysis and a more delicate approach to the improvement of transfer within the context of the comprehensive community college.

The metaphor of the pipeline fits traditional concepts of transfer education well. Indeed, the pipeline is a very good model if the goal is to direct commitments and resources to the destination of transfer. I have attempted to show that the basic premises and much of the thinking involved in the metaphor are inappropriate in the context of the comprehensive community college. The community college leadership will have to be more creative and thoughtful than anything I have seen to date in seeking appropriate avenues for the improvement of the transfer function. Clumsy or over-zealous attempts to move the transfer function to higher priority can upset the delicate balance of the comprehensive community college, result in divisiveness, and destroy the feelings of commitment and purpose of the faculty that are reported in the Carnegie Trendlines. Perhaps we need something comparable to environmental impact studies. What, for example, is the impact of the decision to make 1991 the "Year of the Transfer" on the environment of the comprehensive community college?

In closing, let me quote from a little book written by John Gardner some 30 years ago, but perhaps even more powerful today. The book is entitled, Excellence: Can we be Equal and Excellent too? Since that is the paradox of the community college, it would behove all who aspire to "Leadership 2000" to read it. He writes:

> An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water. (1961, p.86).

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